

Throwing away the textbook: a process drama approach to teaching ESL in China

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Abstract

The author considers the effectiveness of process drama as a pedagogical method and questions the difference between process drama and the kinds of role-play commonly used in ESL classes. Adopting a process drama methodology the author delivered two Oral English courses for undergraduate students and at the conclusion of the course invited the students to evaluate their learning in the form of a focus group. The results of the research suggest that there are distinct advantages to using a process drama approach to teaching oral English. Students on the course not only improved their self-confidence and operational performance but also exhibited behaviours commonly attributed to autonomous learners. They were also able to identify these improvements in themselves and engage in goal setting for future learning.

Keywords: process; drama; ESL (English as a second language); problem-based learning

Introduction

This paper explores the use of process drama as a tool for teaching oral English and emerges from research conducted by the researcher while teaching English Language Majors at Hebei United University, Tangshan, China. The researcher, on arrival at the university, was invited to develop a new course using drama to teach ESL. The stated aims of the course were to promote oral English skills, improve the students' communicative fluency and develop their abilities as autonomous learners. In addition, it was a requirement of the course that the students explore English culture through a variety of media sources such as TV drama.

During the development of the course, a number of questions arose concerning the use of authentic texts and the effectiveness of drama as an approach compared to more traditional ESL teaching methods. In particular, a question arose about the difference between the kinds of role-play commonly utilised in language classes and the nature of drama as a tool for language learning. Reflecting upon their own training and experience as an ESL teacher, the researcher also made comparisons between the kinds of texts found in language textbooks with those that students might usefully encounter while watching UK TV drama. Adopting a process drama methodology, the researcher delivered the course to two classes of undergraduate students and at the conclusion of the course invited the students to participate in evaluating their learning in the form of a focus group. In process drama the students use improvisation to devise dramatic situations that reflect real events, situations and issues that are meaningful to them and mirror the real world, thereby offering the potential for classroom interactions within an ESL context to take on a transformative intensity that emerges from a personal vision of the world in which students live (see *Bowell and Heap 2001, p7* and *O'Neill 1995, p152*).

The research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach to teaching ESL and ask questions about how best to promote learner autonomy, motivation and communicative fluency. The results of the evaluation would suggest that there are distinct advantages to utilising a process drama approach to teaching oral English. The researcher's observations supported by student comments during the focus groups suggest that students on the course not only improved their self-confidence and communicative fluency but also exhibited behaviours commonly attributed to autonomous learners. They were also able to identify these improvements in themselves and engage in goal setting for future learning.

Using drama to teach ESL

Autonomous learners are self-motivated, reflective, lifelong learners who are confident about how they learn, acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses as learners, and are active in forming learning partnerships with their peers. Chinese students, however, have a tendency to be exam orientated and are more used to a teacher-focused approach to learning. They are less familiar with learning environments where they are encouraged to take responsibility for and manage their own learning (Zhong, 2010). A review of the literature on the subject offers a number of pedagogical approaches that can be employed to promote learner autonomy. For example, problem-based learning in ESL classrooms promotes an encounter with language that seeks to mirror real-world language use and encourages students to develop skills in action (Prince, 2011). Newton (2001) suggests that task-based learning is a useful strategy which offers the possibility for modelling language encounters in a more authentic manner where learners are required to 'develop strategies for managing new language while also maintaining a communicative focus' (Newton 2001, p30). Both of these approaches place at the heart of learning the notion that learners should engage in 'whole language learning' and 'real social practice' through 'authentic, meaningful activities' (Collins and Scott Fine 2011, p52). The use of drama mirrors this real-world interaction and encourages students to explore roles within a dramatic context, which help them to relate to the world in which they will encounter language.

Differentiating between a range of different approaches to using drama in the ESL classroom, Kao and O'Neill (1998) offer a critique of the most common forms. With closed and controlled approaches such as scripted dialogues following predetermined rules, the focus is on the acquisition of target language, memorisation of sentence patterns and accuracy of performance. Though the activity may be orientated towards practicing for anticipated real world encounters, there is no self-generated communication taking place (Kao and O'Neill 1998, p6). Simulation and role-play suffer from similar issues. In real life people do not follow scripts and language use is unpredictable. In addition, the use of pre-determined roles and social situations structures a set of attitudes and values which may not reflect the students' own (Kao and O'Neill 1998, p7), whereas open or drama approaches encourage learners to interact with greater authenticity, involving spontaneous use of language and improvised responses to unpredictable language use.

In particular, Kao and O'Neill (1998) recommend the use of process drama as a means of working with language to structure complex dramatic situations that require students to reflect on their own values and attitudes about the world and their relationship to it. Process drama is an approach in which the teacher and the students collaborate within an imaginary dramatic context to explore a particular problem, situation, or theme, not necessarily for any particular audience but for the purposes of structuring a learning experience. In a process drama, students develop characters for performance and engage in a variety of reflective out-of-role activities, requiring them to think beyond their own values and attitudes and to consider other points of view. The performance is usually unscripted requiring students to improvise responses to given dramatic contexts based on the particular qualities and traits of the character they are playing. For example, having adopted a story-world and characters from a given UK TV drama series, students would then be given a dramatic problem to solve and a context within which to solve it, e.g. a stranger in a strange land, homophobic bullying, or family secrets. Students then not only explore the dynamics, relationships and conflicts that shape a given situation, but may also acquire factual knowledge related to the topic of the drama, thus offering the possibility for them to gain greater self-awareness, improved confidence and a greater understanding of the challenges and possibilities facing them in the real-world.

In order to facilitate the use of process drama in the ESL classroom Collins and Scott Fine (2011) propose the use of what they call high structured, mid structured and low structured exercises to promote the movement away from teacher as instructor, and towards that of facilitator in order to further foster learner autonomy.

The nature of these is detailed below:

- High structured – choice of video material, cultural context, introduction of and familiarisation with process tools, defining meta language and jargon, instructor led.
- Mid structured – shift towards brainstorming, discussion, negotiation and interpretation with tutor as facilitator.
- Low structured – independent learning, interaction, creative exploration, team working, leadership and ideas implementation with tutor as mentor sharing in the process of discovery.

The author used this approach to process drama as a way of synthesising task-based and problem-based activities into one organising principle, in the context of a 15-week course.

High structured activities

The initial high structured phase included viewing a UK TV drama - either episodes from a soap opera (e.g. Eastenders, Coronation Street, Emmerdale) or a serial drama (e.g. Waterloo Road, Shameless, Skins, Doctor Who). In class, students would be exposed to three or four episodes from a series, depending on programme duration, and would be encouraged the view more episodes as self-directed study. This would be preceded by an introduction to the background and cultural context of the story or introduction to the characters. Using video in the classroom offers students the possibility of a real encounter with language contextualised by a depth of other visual cues including setting, non-verbal language and narrative. It is rather like being part of a 'language community' (Walker 2011, p2) where the 'communicative situation' is contextualised in a way that informs comprehension through linguistic, paralinguistic and cross-cultural information which will enable the students to make comparisons with their own culture and language (Walker 2011, p2). Post screening, there would be an opportunity to ask questions and discuss issues and themes arising. Following this, the class would undertake a close analysis of either characters or story, with additional language work where appropriate. Although there was always a high level of interaction between the teacher and the learners this phase was 'teacher-led' and included occasional acting workshops that aimed to break down inhibitions and/or develop skills in character development or improvisation.

Mid structured activities

The mid structured phase would involve learners working in groups to develop their own characters using pre-prepared worksheets along with language glossaries. As this process developed, the students were introduced to concepts of story structure and undertook simple creative writing exercises. In this way, the teacher began to slip into the role of facilitator as students began to organise their own group working activities and create their own story ideas. Following on from this, students were encouraged to work within the classic 'three act story' structure to produce a title, one sentence synopsis (or tag line), one paragraph synopsis, and finally a three paragraph outline (beginning-setup, middle-struggle and end-resolution) that would be presented to class for feedback. As the activities progressed, additional or creative obstructions would be placed into the writing process. For example:

- The story must be set in the fictional world of the programme they had watched.
- The characters must be from the fictional world of the programme they had watched.
- The performance must respond to a given brief (e.g. family secrets, stranger in a strange land or other themes that offered a suitable set of restrictions such as adaptation, film noir etc...).

This provided the students with a social and cultural context within which their characters could behave and interact.

Low structured activities

The final low structured phase saw the students work within their groups independently within the classroom. At this stage, the teacher has become a facilitator, encouraging, offering advice and steering students towards the creation of their own work. This often involved explaining the brief to the students, and pulling them back on track when they came up with wild deviations from the topic. Students would be given an opportunity to rehearse and feedback would be given on storyline, blocking, acting, and clarity of expression of ideas. Students were encouraged not to learn lines but to improvise the dialogue based on their knowledge of their story as it was felt this mirrored authentic speech acts more closely. The course would normally conclude with a final performance by each group to the class and in addition students would write a short critical reflection on the experience and their learning during that semester.

Research methods

The author adopted a qualitative methodology in order to explore the research questions in depth and used focus groups as the main technique for gathering data. A small sample of two groups of six students; one group from level one (freshmen) and one group from level two (sophomore), from a cohort of around one hundred and twenty were invited to participate in the study. The groups consisted mainly of female students, as the ratio of male to female on the course is roughly ten to one. Each group included at least one male student; otherwise the groups were self-selecting. The focus group was facilitated by a Mandarin speaking colleague who worked with questions formulated by the researcher.

The facilitator employed a semi-structured approach to the questioning based around a number of key themes which allowed for follow on questions i.e. what differences do the students notice between this course and other ESL courses they have taken, what changes have they noticed in their linguistic competency, what challenges have they faced in the classroom on this course, and do they recognise a difference between role-play and drama as a classroom activity. Though the facilitator was inexperienced in this role she received extensive coaching from more experienced colleagues in order to remove language as an obstacle for expression. Furthermore, the facilitator's fluency in both English and Mandarin enabled the decoding of cross-cultural meanings bringing the researcher 'up close to the problems of meaning equivalence' (Temple 2004, p168).

Analysis of the data was undertaken following the rubric of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a methodology that seeks to explore personal experiences, perspectives and perceptions (Smith 2003, p53). Following a detailed set of practical, procedural guidelines (Eatough and Tomkins 2010) the data was added to a spreadsheet in order to facilitate analysis. Through a process of sorting based on the coding of keywords and phrases, the researcher was then able to further categorise the data in order to identify a range of emergent themes. The process of coding is iterative and requires the researcher to revisit the data a number of times as themes emerge to further refine and categorise the findings in order to develop a cogent thesis. The emergent themes were:

- Monitoring progression
- Activities outside the classroom
- Learning about learning
- Cultural difference
- Drama
- Language and culture
- Operational confidence
- Creativity and self-expression
- Performing language.

These are explored in detail in the discussion section that follows where examples of recurrent patterns in comments made by students are offered along with some analysis by the researcher.

There are clearly a number of difficulties with undertaking this kind of research that need to be borne in mind when considering the data. The first issue concerns the way in which Chinese students engage in indirect or reserved forms of expression and take a listening orientated stance, especially when communicating with status figures. Being talkative in Chinese society can be seen as socially inappropriate and, in addition, a fear of losing face may lead to limited self-disclosure on the part of participants. It may even lead to an unwillingness to offer criticism of the course tutor, as this may be seen as taking away of 'face' (Cortazzi 2011, p519). This often leads to a sense that the group in Chinese culture speaks with one voice even though individuals may have their own preferred opinions. Thus, the data may well be skewed towards a positive evaluation of the course experience. On reflection, it may have been more useful to undertake an anonymous form of research such as a survey or even an individual semi-structured interview. However, both of these approaches would have required the researcher to be fluent in Mandarin and consequently would not have been appropriate for this study. In addition, the researcher's position within Chinese society as an 'outsider' (the researcher is ethnically European) may have functioned as a further barrier to honest and authentic representations of personal opinions and feelings.

The second issue concerns the process of translating the raw data from Chinese into English for analysis. The literature on the subject recommends checking the conformity of the translation (Liu and Xu 2009, p499) against the Chinese transcript with the interviewer and then finally re-writing the interview scripts in English with all the translation errors corrected. Further correction could then be incorporated through what Edwards (1998, p201) calls 'back translation' whereby the final text is then returned to the original interviewees for further correction and corroboration. In the end, since the activity was intended as a small-scale action research project it was decided to limit the translation work to a transcription and first translation.

Results and discussion

Monitoring progression

One aspect of being an autonomous learner is the ability to monitor self- progression. When using structured textbooks of the kind commonly found in ESL classrooms this might seem like an easy thing for the student to do. For example, as the class progresses through the textbook some sense of accomplishment can be felt even though actual learning might be limited. With a more open ended, task-based approach there is unlikely to be a clear benchmark of this kind. However, students commented that they accumulated progress over the arc of the course. One student offered the following observation:

Traditional textbooks are dull and rigid. You know how the class goes and you just learn it. You know if you learn something and practice it you can do it. You can feel obvious progress. However, for this class, you need to follow his thinking, step by step, to gradually make progress. The progress is not that easily felt. After a long period of accumulation, quite unaware, you can make great progress. You just don't know it at the time.

Here, there is a recognition of progress that takes the overall experience of the course into account and which acknowledges progress is not something that can be measured on a daily incremental level. Such a conception of progress is likely to include a sense of personal success and indicates the student is able to reflect on key learning moments and the way in which they link to learning activities.

Activities outside the classroom

The ability to organise and manage self-directed study is another key indicator of autonomous learning. In general, the experience of the author is that students are not used to engaging in any language learning activities outside the classroom. However, the need to develop characters and narrative throughout the course put the students under a certain amount of pressure to prepare for the class:

I think it is a change of study attitude. In the past, I just sat in a class, and didn't need to do something else, but I have to do some preparation before going to his class. I dare not to attend his class without doing any work in advance, because you don't know what to say if you don't do preparation. Only in this way can we make progress...

Students were often given informal homework to do with the aim of motivating students to use resources available to them outside of class and so to further support their in-class learning:

It is like a kind of momentum. What he teaches in class may trigger your curiosity, and then this curiosity may motivate you to surf the internet to look for more information. Correspondingly, you learn more.

While it is likely that much of the organisation and planning outside of class was likely to have been conducted in Chinese, the nature of the performance they were preparing required them to at least work with English as part of that process:

For the short play, although it is performed in class, we devote lots of time and energy into it outside class. In the process of rehearsing these short plays, we really want to learn western speaking style and life style. When we are rehearsing, we usually discuss, for western people, how they will speak and act. We want to know more about them, and learn their way of expression.

Here the student describes the ways in which the course content motivated them as autonomous language learners. Note that they also make a direct link between behaviour, lifestyle and expression through language.

Learning about learning

A key component of any course that aims to promote autonomous learning is the inclusion of activities which encourage students to recognise the ways in which they learn. The success of such a strategy would seemingly be the ability of learners to identify these skills and adopt them. Here, a student identifies the interconnectedness of different learning activities:

...if we have persistence, we can make great progress. Just as our teacher said, some people like acting, some like speaking, some like reading, the point is to find your best way. Whatever way that you take, as long as you are serious in the process, and then you can make it. Supposing that you were preparing a speech, you had to collect many relevant information and materials from the moment you chose the topic, and quite unaware, you would learn something. In addition, reading and writing are interrelated. If you make progress in reading, it will be conducive to your writing, and vice versa. We need to find a method that fits us and we like.

Another interesting comment that arose concerned the emotional dimension of learning through drama. A student noted the following:

Taking designing dialogue for example, you beat your brain to make your lines brief and powerful. In this process, you need the help of a dictionary as reference. The words that you learn in this process are bound to leave a deeper impression than the words that you memorise mechanically. That is it. When you are performing, the atmosphere and emotion can help you to internalise that word.

There is an important distinction made here between rote memorisation and the way in which drama can make language more meaningful. The student is clearly acknowledging this in relation to their ability to learn and acknowledges how language is 'internalised' through meaningful discourse.

Cultural difference

One of the key aims of the course was to provide students with an 'encounter' with English culture through the use of UK TV drama. However, there has been a long tradition of 'social realism' in UK TV drama and consequently it is common for story-lines to explore taboo subjects or depict changing moral values and consequently it often covers controversial subjects. For example, a key storyline in an episode of a drama concerned bullying and homosexuality. Initially, this was a cause of embarrassment and consternation for the students who had not, it seems, been previously exposed to such an overtly taboo subject through TV drama. A student commented:

He told us that is the most real side of English society. We think it is unacceptable because we only knew the positive side of them in the past, but we are confronted with the dark, twisted but real side.

It is possible that many ESL teachers working in China will be familiar with the feeling that Chinese students have a rose-tinted, idealised conception of English society. So, opening this up for critical appraisal would seem like a good thing and one, which offers a possibility for a real encounter not just with English culture but with their own perceptions of what this might be:

I think, wherever it is, China or foreign countries, drama represents a microcosm of society. To learn foreign culture through drama is an interesting way. We feel that it is very interesting, because all of us can take part in the process.

Not only does this student acknowledge the relationship between drama and everyday culture they also make the observation that it is interesting and easily accessible to them. Students recognised the value of exposing them to English language in use:

In my opinion, this class creates an English language environment. We communicate with English in this class, that is, we think in English what to do and how to do things. Because of this, we can gradually make progress.

They also recognise the way in which, through acting a role, they invested in the values and attitudes of that character:

I think this course is not limited to drama activity. You put yourself in the shoes of the role that you are acting, and merge into the plot of the drama, which presents a striking contrast to your everyday life. You make progress in the process of drama, such as your communication ability or your performing ability.

Thus, the students were able to put themselves in the position of other characters, from other cultures and this also placed their own cultural values and attitudes in a different perspective.

Drama, language and culture

Students identified a number of benefits that arise from the use of TV drama in the classroom. For example, they comment on the way in which the close reading of TV drama helped them to learn to read meta-language such as gestures, or recognise that location and context can also help with interpreting meaning:

...we can improve our oral English and learn more about English culture in communications... we can learn their gestures in speaking. Our English speaking becomes more natural with those gestures.

They also commented that:

Drama reflects lifestyles in foreign countries. The language used in drama is closer to the language that native speakers use in life. To put it in another way, we are learning a way of communication through drama.

So, it would seem that students believe it to be the case that using TV drama in the classroom offers not only the possibility of exposure to new perspectives, cultural values and attitudes, it also gives students an experience of a more authentic use of language and focuses their skills development on communicative competency.

Operational confidence

The overall improvement in self-confidence, based on a comparison of students' behaviour in class, was evident to the researcher but also acknowledged by the students:

...as a beginning learner of a new language, you think other people may laugh at you if you can't speak well. While in that class, standing there, you must speak, as if you are pressed to do so, because your classmates are watching. Gradually, you come to know it is not a big deal even if your performance is not that good. You are acting, just speak. You don't feel that nervous any longer. Standing there, in that atmosphere, you learn to use that language...

This improvement in confidence translated into a lively and engaged classroom with students unafraid to ask questions or take part in discussions. The use of drama as a safe vehicle for self-expression clearly played a part in this progress. Students grew used to speaking in front of the class, they learnt that making mistakes was a good thing, they learnt to improvise responses to unpredictable situations. But most important of all they learnt to lose face and not feel ashamed.

Creativity and self-expression

Students also valued the opportunity to do something creative in the classroom and enjoyed working together in small groups to achieve an outcome. Chinese students love singing and acting together so using drama in the classroom seemed to play to their strengths:

Drama activity lays much emphasis on the cooperation of all roles. You must bring your imagination into full play. When we are playing together, we must gather together for several nights to design the lines and actions.

They also recognised the differences between the kinds of role-plays they are used to and the process drama activities they experienced on the course:

When role-play is concerned, the only requirement for you is to speak your lines, while, with regard to drama activity, you must be emotionally involved. When we are designing drama activity, we must use our brain, which is different from role-play in which we just copy other person's lines. If you use your brain in this process, you get closer to English.

So it appears that the students' emotional engagement with problem solving may be an important factor in motivating them to undertake learning activities outside the classroom.

Performing language

Initially students were reluctant to perform without lines and would often hold notes with their dialogue written out. It was explained to them that this was a barrier to the expression of their character and that it was better for them to improvise. With practice they grew more confident and were able to dispense with scripted dialogue, which benefited their performative language competence:

...when unexpected problems arise, it calls for the cooperation of all players. That is, it is a moment to test a player's reaction ability. When your partner finishes, you are supposed to speak your lines. However, if you forget your line at this critical moment, you need to bring your reacting ability into play to make up for you forgetting your lines. Your reaction ability grows in such a process.

Although initially reluctant to work without pre-scripted dialogue, the student above identifies a number of benefits of being able to improvise speech, which of course mirrors real-world language use.

Conclusion

The findings support a claim that the course promoted the development of autonomous learning capabilities among the students. There is some evidence that in particular cases this may have led to a long-term change in their personal learning strategies. This suggests that there would be value to undertaking a longitudinal study evaluating the long-term transformational benefits of adopting process drama as pedagogic approach in ESL classrooms.

The use of UK TV drama as an initial stimulus for the process of developing character and story provided the students with an opportunity to engage with more authentic texts, and to see these within a social and cultural landscape. They were able to reflect on their own perceptions of English culture in the light of seeing these dramas and also make comparisons with their own social and cultural experiences.

The researcher observed that the use of process drama improved students' communicative fluency, enhancing not just their oral skills but also their ability to integrate linguistic communication skills within a general communicative framework that included body language and gestures, an observation supported by comments made by students during the focus groups. In addition, the students were more motivated to participate fully in the course, as they were encouraged to make an emotional investment in their own creative work.

As a methodology, process drama is simple to adopt. For those seeking tools and techniques to use in the classroom and there are many examples of good practice to draw on from fields outside of ESL. The most important capability a teacher can bring to such a course is a passion for creativity and problem solving. The evidence presented here suggests that throwing away the textbook and giving students the opportunity to engage in creative practice has a value not just for them but also for the teacher who, in the instance of this study, found themselves in an exciting, challenging but dynamic classroom environment with groups of highly motivated and creative students.

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